

A NIGHTHAWK'S ROOSTING PLACE

BY THOMAS MASON EARL

It is my purpose in this sketch to describe a nighthawk's roosting place which came under my observation for five successive years, a very humble spot for a domicile, to which, no doubt, this particular bird was as much attached as any one, beast or human, could be to more elaborate quarters. The story I wish to narrate is a simple one, but withal so full of food for thought, that readers may well give it more than a passing perusal.

One fine summer morning in July in the year of our Lord 1915, I had arisen just about the time the golden sun in the east was reddening the horizon. Stepping to the door to get a breath of the pure morning air, I heard the "peent" of a couple of nighthawks about overhead. Looking up to obtain a sight of the birds, I was surprised to see one of them dart headlong down and alight on the bough of an elm tree that grew not more than twenty feet from where I was standing. The other bird continued on its overhead journey, whither I knew not. The descending bird, I thought, had come down to rest. So it had, but the rest was to continue all day until the sun had run its course across the heavens and was bidding adieu to the immediate landscape amid the rosy blushes of the west.

Many times during that day my eyes wandered to the half-rotten bough which the nighthawk, evidently a female, had selected for sleeping quarters. The bough was some forty feet from the ground and projected directly outward over the street. It was unprotected by foliage from the sun or rain. The bird perched or rather squatted lengthwise of the limb, according to nighthawk fashion, and faced outwards from the trunk of the tree. Had I not seen the bird alight, it is quite probable I would not have noticed it at all, so motionless that one's eye would have passed it by as a natural excrescence. Punctually at sunset it flew away to join its companions in an evening quest for such food as might be found invading the twilight atmosphere.

You may be sure I was anxious to know whether its roost had been but transiently selected, or that it was indeed "home, sweet home," to this strange bird of the dusk. Day after day, however, the nighthawk occupied the same spot, never deviating apparently an inch in its slumbering place.

Right here I must state that our street was being repaired that summer and part of the time a steam shovel and half a hundred men were working directly under the bird's bedroom, making all the uncanny clangor that such work calls into being, but the nighthawk paid no more attention to the noise than though it had been the whistling of a wren in a sylvan glade. Much rain fell too, and sudden storms broke the serenity of nature, but nothing daunted, the bird shook its wings sometimes of the water and crouched again for further slumber. On several occasions sudden heavy squalls lifted the goatsucker from its bed and blew it, I know not where, but it was always back the next morning, smiling and happy just as though nothing had happened.

As the fall approached I knew the time was near when my little sister of the air would bid adieu to the scenes of her summer sojourn, and with others of her kind would set out upon a long journey southward. The opportunity was open to me to learn the very date of a nighthawk's leave-taking, as migration records of this bird had not been fully determined. I wished sometimes I could have struck up a mutual friendship with the little minx that had made her summer home so near and yet so far from me. But if she really ever noticed me giving her more than ordinary attention, she had never indicated that there was any reciprocal feeling of interest. No doubt she regarded all earth-walkers as worms of the dust, far inferior to her own kind that could mount like spirits to the vault of heaven.

On the fourth day of September she had a companion, a large male nighthawk that passed the day on the same bough, some two feet further out. One bird paid no attention to the other,—seemingly oblivious of each other's presence. The newcomer left his perch about half an hour before sunset without even a husky "goodbye" to the little owner of the ranch whose hospitality he had shared for the day. I concluded that his presence was quite incidental, that he was probably on his migration from some point farther north. He did not return the following day, but the little nighthawk was in her accustomed place on the fifth and on the sixth, always leaving the perch at sunset. On the seventh she was gone, and repeated search failed to discover any further traces of her that fall. The weather was mild, so she was not forced to leave on account of stormy conditions, but in her little heart she knew the fullness of time had

come to depart. Would she return in the spring? Would she find her way back to the old elm after a journey of a thousand miles or more over mountains and valleys to the land of her winter sojourn? I was anxious to know, and was eager for the time to come when I knew her return could be looked for with others of her kind.

The first week of May came; other nighthawks were in evidence, but the one for which I was looking had not arrived. The second week of May passed, still the home on the bough had no tenant. It was a mere notion on my part that the bird would return, and as the time now seemed past for her vernal arrival, I grew disinterested and gave over watching. One day, however, in the last week of May I chanced to look up at the old elm bough, and there sat my nighthawk in the very spot where I had last seen her in the fall. Unfortunately I was unable to tell the exact time she returned to her old domicile, but thereafter for the balance of the summer she never missed a day from her accustomed roosting place. When September came she was in evidence until the evening of the eighth (1916). On the ninth she was gone, no more to appear until the following May. If she ever had any incubation duties, I do not know when she attended to them. I am thinking she was a spinster; she never entertained male company, and perhaps had a poor opinion of the opposite sex anyhow. Who knows but she might have welcomed some Prince Charming to her heart and home, and looked forward to the date when fate would send to her the nighthawk she could love, honor, and obey.

I again watched for her return the following May (1917), but was again in doubt as to when it occurred. When I found her, she was on a bough some six feet below the former one. She had chosen a new site, and during the rest of the summer was sometimes seen in one place, sometimes in the other. She had now two homes, yet in the main the old bough was the favorite one.

The fall proving stormy, the goatsucker left on its migrations about the first of September, reappearing in the following May (1918). There was little deviation in its choice of roosts from the preceding summer, but on one occasion I found her roosting on the facade of a row of flats which stood just back of the big elm.

In 1919 the roosting was very irregular; a number of days at

intervals the bird was not seen, but occasionally the old roost was occupied. The fall migrations were started in all of the years the bird was observed, before the ninth of September. In the summer of 1920 the little goatsucker did not return so far as I was able to discern. Had it met with mishap on its long journey—fallen prey perhaps to some hawk, or shot down by some fowler? Or had it fallen in at last with her Prince Charming and gone off with him to an equally humble domicile on the top of some city building, there to deposit her two speckled eggs from which would eventually come a progeny of baby nighthawks.

How remarkable it seems that the love of home is so strong in a bird's heart that it will return year after year to the very spot which has become endeared to it. But even more remarkable is the instinct implanted in its little brain to return without deviation to its former abode, and without an apparent effort in determining its proper course over hills and valleys, forests and streams. As Bryant says of the waterfowl:

“There is a Power whose care
Guideth thy way along the pathless coast,
The desert and illimitable air,
Lone wandering but not lost.”

THE PHILOSOPHY OF BIRDS' NESTS AND COMPARATIVE
CALOLOGY IN CONSIDERATION OF
SOME LOCAL NIDICOLUS BIRDS

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(Continued from September, 1924, Bulletin)

(9) Among the Passerine birds, such species as the Horned Lark, Bobolink, Ipswich and Lark Sparrows, Ground Warblers and Pipits are natural walkers and ordinarily build countersunk nests (i.e., hollows scratched in the earth or leaves).

The Lark Sparrow and Towhee occasionally nest in bushes. The Cowbird is also a walker and this may account for its preference for ground or near ground nests in which to drop its eggs.

Reference has been made elsewhere to the atavistic tendency of the Starling to nest upon the ground in some localities. The Starling is a walker. The Brown Thrasher and Robin are